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ABSTRACT

This paper is an impressionistic appraisal of group counseling as a component of a coordinated approach to college level remediation. Counselors were assigned a group of students who were enrolled in Communication Skills, a course co-sponsored and team taught by the Departments of Compensatory Programs (Reading), English (Writing), and Speech (Speaking). It was designed to take a holistic approach to remediation by the integration of these areas of communication arts. The paper describes the techniques used by two counselors and their impressions of the impact of group counseling intervention on two separate groups of communication skills students and their respective teaching team. (Author)

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GROUP COUNSELING AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

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## GROUP COUNSELLING AND COMMUNICATION SKILLS

### An Impressionistic Appraisal of a Coordinated Approach to College Level Remediation and Counseling

#### I. Introduction

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The Department of Compensatory Programs at Bernard M. Baruch College was established in 1970 in order to service two categories of students: those entering under the aegis of the SEEK Program (Search for Education, Elevation, and Knowledge), and the academically under-prepared students entering under the newly instituted open admissions policy of C.U.N.Y. Although there were many similarities between these two groups of students, there were also essential differences. SEEK was created by the New York State Legislature on July 5, 1966 under Laws of New York, Chapter 782, Section 13 which appropriated a million dollars to create special programs for the screening, testing, tutoring, and counseling of residents of New York State who met the following criteria:

(1) they were graduated from an approved high school or attained a New York State high school equivalency diploma or its equivalent as defined by the Commission; (2) they possessed the potential for successful completion of college; (3) they were "economically and educationally disadvantaged," (General Plan for SEEK, 1973-74). The majority of these students are Black and Hispanic.

The open admissions policy of C.U.N.Y. permitted all graduates of New York City high schools after 1970 not in the SEEK program to enter C.U.N.Y. regardless of high school average. This population was 17.7% Black and 3.5% Puerto Rican in the Fall of 1970. Almost three quarter of these students were from white working class families.

The major responsibility of the Department of Compensatory Programs is to provide and coordinate remediation and counseling services for all SEEK students and for those non-SEEK students who were found to need remediation in at least two areas as result of English, Reading, and math placement tests.

## II. The Communication Skills Program

The placement of students into programs commensurate with their abilities and capabilities is most important. Failure to do so can result in poor student motivation, an increase in class absenteeism, and lowering of grade achievement potential. Baruch College set out to reduce the failure rate of underprepared students by employing new ways of registration and by introducing a variety of remedial and corrective courses into the curriculum. Lindgren (1969) considered well-organized help a crucial element in the development of favorable attitudes toward successful tenure in college.

Communication Skills is an interdisciplinary program which is designed to take a holistic approach to remediation by the integration of speaking, reading, and writing. These three subjects are team taught by faculty from the Speech Department (speaking), the Department of Compensatory Programs (reading) and the English Department (writing). Teams hold class nine hours a week in a setting of no more than 15 students per class, with three class hours allotted for each component. The team members cooperate to promote skill and conceptual reinforcement between the English language disciplines.

Team teaching has been found to be "a system of instruction,

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tested by time and marked by success, by which many students can find unusual opportunities for personal growth and academic progress." (LaFauci, 1970).

Students earn seven credits upon successful completion of two semesters of work. Though this is intended as a two semester course, students able to complete any component in one semester will be exempt from that component the following semester. In some few cases students may complete all three components in one semester. (Mitchem, 1974).

Counselor Intervention

Two hundred five (205) entering freshmen were placed in Communication Skills during the Fall 1973 semester as a result of extremely low scores on the English and reading placement tests. Of these 205 students, 53 were SEEK students, the remainder were open admissions students. Counselors were assigned to each Communication Skills group and worked with teaching the team in an effort to facilitate understanding, follow-up teacher recommendations concerning student strengths and weaknesses, interpret student concerns to teachers, and provide a relatively unstructured setting in which students could explore some of their concerns, satisfactions and frustrations about being in the Communication Skills program.

What follows is an impressionistic appraisal of the utilization of group counseling techniques with students in the Communication Skills program during the Fall 1973 semester. In general, the counseling approach was primarily group counseling on a weekly basis, supplemented

by individual conferences on an as-needed basis.

Traditionally, one of the biggest problems faced by counselors in the Department of Compensatory Programs at Baruch College involves access to students. Because the school suffers from the major malady of a large urban commuter college, (it is situated in six (6) facilities located within a five block radius), finding and seeing students can be a frustrating experience. This is compounded by the fact that the counseling staff of the department is located in one of the ancillary buildings. Baruch is best described as one large subway stop, terminology which adequately describes the sense of alienation from the college that many freshmen feel.

The organization and nature of the Communication Skills program provided one of the first significant ways to circumvent this problem. The counselors could go directly to the classroom, introduce themselves, describe their function, get basic information about the students (program schedules and biographical data forms) and arrange to meet with them on a regular basis. This eliminated the cold inefficiency of an introductory letter that was often thrown away along with hundreds of other introductory letters that freshman students receive.

A second positive outgrowth of the Communication Skills program was the fact that the students in each group spent a lot of time together, and a strong sense of trust and group cohesion developed early in the semester. As a result, group counseling became much more productive in helping students evaluate themselves and each other in ways that helped them to develop a better sense of autonomy and purpose in college.

Group counseling, therefore, was envisioned as a tool through which students could be encouraged to express and explore their satisfactions and dissatisfactions with the Communication Skills program in general and their own teachers and classes in particular. It was seen as a way to reinforce some of the learning objectives of the Communication Skills program, and to aid the students in their overall adjustment to college. Finally, it was designed to provide basic information about school rules and procedures to give the students operational knowledge of the college setting.

Two very different Communication Skills groups will be the focus of this paper. Each group was assigned a different counselor. (See Table I for ethnic breakdown). In general, the problem encountered by students in both groups were problems which are generic to most young adults in making the transition from high school to college. They were shaped, however, by the common experience of being in an intensive remediation program. As a result a basic problem encountered was one of morale. Most of the students were discouraged and disappointed by being placed in a program that defined them as having the most serious formal English language deficiencies among their classmates. This was compounded because their credit load was limited to three to five credits in courses such as art, music, library, and remedial math. The problem of morale was intensified along racial lines.

Some white students felt that remediation was for Blacks and Puerto Ricans, and that they did not belong in this program or need the skills which the program was designed to improve. Some Black students felt that their teachers were racist and discriminating against them because they were Black.

Table I

Ethnic Breakdown of Two Groups of Communication Skills Students

	Black	White	Hispanic	Total
Group I	14	2	2	18
Group II	3	4	6	13
Totals	17	6	8	31

In Group I, 14 of the students were SEEK

In Group II, there were 3 SEEK students

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In both groups, the specific problems which were expressed and addressed in the counseling sessions could be divided into three categories all of which are aspects of the overall problem of adjusting to college... These are as follows:

Category 1

Difficulty in attending school on a regular disciplined basis.

Category 2

- a. Developing a personal (internalized) system of rewards and punishment, and
- b. Developing self-imposed standards of excellence.

Category 3

- a. Diagnosis and analysis of problem situations and the construction of do-able methods of problem-solving, and
- b. Definition and concretization of goals.

The problem of attendance is also related to the task of developing a personal system of rewards and punishment referred to in Category 2. Although it is beyond the scope of this discussion to point out the major pitfalls of public high school education in general and that provided in low-income, Black and Puerto Rican neighborhoods in particular, let it suffice to say that there is a pervasive acceptance of mediocrity, excuses and poor attendance. The system of reward and punishment which exists is imposed by school authorities and is adhered to or gotten around depending upon the situation. In high school, the students had been concerned merely with "gettin' over." As a result, many of them came with the attitude that it was not

necessary to come to school on a regular basis, nor to do more than minimal work in order to complete any given assignment.

The problem of attendance was addressed in the group settings through discussion. The counselors made it very clear that they expected the students to be in school. As a result, attendance at group sessions and at classes became a group standard, supported by peer pressure. Although one could not say with great assurance that the students now understand the relationship between the teacher's perception of them (attendance as one factor) and the grades they receive, the behavior of most of the students has improved appreciably. Although attendance in group sessions and classes did not present the same kinds of problems in Group II as in Group I, in both groups the members soon began to check on each other's attendance. ✓

The more general issue of developing internalized standards of excellence was also addressed in group discussions. The counselor tried to balance their position between that of authority figure and advisor, helping students to develop their own set of standards. Also, because the counselors would often ask to see papers and would go over them to aid in understanding the teachers' comments, the students were continually challenged to reconsider their definitions of excellence. This was also demonstrated by the improvement in the quality of the work which they handed to the teachers.

Counselors in both Group I and II found that their students had difficulty in the area of problem diagnosis, analysis and solution, and developed various problem-solving tasks designed to help the students. The task of problem-solving is closely related to the problem of defining and concretizing goals.

The students were asked to develop goals and outline steps necessary to accomplish them. They worked in pairs, giving one another feedback. Problems such as "Mr. X always puts me down in class" were identified, diagnosed and discussed by the group. Role play was often used as a means of testing solutions. Another approach was to take a story which has been used in a class discussion and focus on the main conflicts for the protagonist, discussing the methods of problem-solving used in that situation.

Students in Group I seemed to be very realistic about what they could expect from the college, although they were having difficulty developing concrete methods for getting the system to work for them. The counselor in Group I helped them first to articulate the fact that there were many ways in which the system would not work for them primarily because they were Black and Puerto Rican, but also because they were poor. They focused on distinguishing reality from fantasy, and from an excuse not to try at all. Role play was used in helping the students explore ways to talk to a teacher when, for example, he or she has turned in a grade with which the student disagrees, and to learn the channels of appeal to redress grievances a student may have against a teacher. In essence, this aspect of group process focused on negotiating the system. Because this group was predominantly Black and felt very strongly that their teachers were racist, they spent a lot of time discussing how to deal with racism and insensitivity on the part of teachers, and how to get what knowledge the teacher had to convey even though he/she was perceived to be a racist.

In Group II, the task of problem-solving was even more strongly linked to goals. Some time was spent discussing the difference between abstract and concrete goals; between long range and short range goals, and the steps necessary to attain a given goal. Students were given a similar task of defining a goal and developing a stepwise program for accomplishing that goal. In this and in the problem-solving tasks, they were urged to distinguish between those steps over which they had complete control, those over which they had partial control, and those over which they had no control at all. They were also given hypothetical problem situations to discuss, resolve and analyze the steps involved in that problem-solving process.

Because they were so outnumbered, the white Students in Group I behaved as deviants in the group. One of them developed a pattern of coming at the end of the counseling group sessions so that the counselor would deal with him as an individual. The other first tried to blend into the group by imitating the Black men. When that failed, he tried consistently to focus group discussions on his own concerns and to direct group process. Neither acted as if he had ever become comfortable with the fact that he was placed in a remedial program.

The issue of racism and discrimination did not arise in Group II. This is partly a result of the fact that the group was much more racially balanced and cohesive and the teachers more sensitive to racial differences.

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Summary and Conclusion

In general, student morale in both groups did improve. It improved in part because once students were in the Communication Skills course they began to see specifically where they fell short of college standards. The students in Group II learned this primarily because the teachers were able to point out to them, in a constructive and supportive manner, their strengths and weaknesses in the communication arts.

The students in Group I learned this in a more negative manner because there was not a consistent educational strategy on the part of their team of teachers. Two of the teachers felt that the students should be required to change both their informal as well as formal language patterns to conform to the traditional norms for college students. The third teacher thought that he should teach the students "black dialect" (which they already knew). On the whole this team lacked an understanding of black culture and college life at an urban commuter university. As a result, the students felt put down at both extremes.

In Group II, group counseling contributed to the improvement in morale because it lent additional and slightly different kinds of support to round out a fairly successful teaching program. In Group I, it was the key to the improvement in student morale because it provided the major share of support which the students received by bridging the gap between the students and teachers, and by helping the students to learn in a non-supportive teaching climate. In both cases, group counseling contributed to an improvement in student morale, not only by allowing the students to ventilate their annoyances and frustrations,

but by helping them to critically analyze their study skills, and their strengths and weaknesses as college students, develop their own criteria for good work, and see the relationship of Communication Skills to their total college plans. Thus, it seems that group counseling is an important component of the Communication Skills program, and the counselor can add much to the team-teaching effort.

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